

Autumn 2007 Issue Number 4



COMMON LIFE

NEWSLETTER

Attending to the Spirit

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Common Words

When the Common Life Community first began, my vision of our practice of attending to the Spirit was like this. Individual members across Canada would each day intentionally take time to be open to the wisdom and presence of the Spirit in whatever way spoke to them – through silence, guided imagery, prayer, dance, walking, meditating, listening to music, journal writing, creative art, sacred reading, etc.

Through this disciplined practice, members would sense the movement and shaping of the Spirit enabling them to be who they were meant to be and connecting them with all of creation. In their sharing or accounting to one another, the small groups would begin to feel equipped to be God's community and act like it. In their individual and group times, they would not only receive the "inspiration" of the Spirit but also send out that healing energy to the brokenness in the world.

You can stop laughing at my naiveté – and arrogance - any time. Just as with God's vision of shalom – of health and wholeness, peace and justice for all - the reality on the ground of course doesn't quite match the vision. You must also have had some idea of what attending to the Spirit meant to you when you committed to this practice and covenanted with your Common Life Group? What was it?

Many Common Life members I'm sure have had "issues" with this practice. We've questioned the term "Spirit" and tried to define "attending." "Discipline" evokes guilt if we don't "practice" regularly and "accountability" provokes resistance. After five years together, our group is still struggling. I sense that others are as well.

We are not alone. Concerns are frequently expressed about the potential for the practice of "spirituality" to become narcissistic and self-serving. Douglas John Hall, our well-known Canadian theologian, has expressed his reservations about the vagueness and shallowness of this term. Susanne Johnson, Associate Professor Christian Education, Perkins School of Theology, has outlined what she considers to be the "issues" around the practice of spirituality in a way that might stimulate your thinking one way or another as you read this newsletter and attend to the Spirit. Johnson defines spirituality as a capacity we human beings have that enables us to transcend our own self interest and participate in God's creative and redemptive activity in all of creation

Her primary concern is that we not be spiritual orphans. No matter what our faith, Johnson might say, we need to be grounded in a Story, in practices of a faith tradition and in community. Her particular interest is in Christianity. She says, "while we do yearn deeply to be connected with the Sacred, not the secular, we have trouble distinguishing between false gods and God, between Christian hope and mere credulity, between

spiritual discipline and spiritual charlatanry, between spiritual depth and emotional froth, between Christian witness and civil religion." ¹ She asks, "Will our lives be oriented by the Judeo-Christian tradition, or will they increasingly gain their saliency from psycho-culture? From which well will we drink? By which deep metaphors will our spirituality, our character, and our religious identity be nourished?" ²

Johnson also worries that once we acknowledge and accept our spiritual capacity as a gift, we will neglect learning the content of our spirituality and practicing its disciplines.³ It would be like accepting that we have musical gifts without learning music and practicing the skills.

Lastly she does not want spiritual practices to be perceived as something more to do. She says, "Spiritual discipline is not a program of self-improvement, not an ideal to be striven for, not a set of tasks to be accomplished. It is, rather, a way of posturing ourselves to receive God's work "for us" through Israel and in Jesus.⁴ Through spiritual disciplines, we posture ourselves to receive and to actualize God's grace in our lives, anticipating the day when all things are made new."⁵ "Through the spiritual disciplines, we not only receive grace, but we also mediate signs of grace to and in the world."⁶ Through the disciplined spiritual life we acquire deep and abiding dispositions, or habits of the heart."⁷

In this issue, we have an accounting of Mardi Tindal's experience of the spiritual practices of community and retreat in a Courage to Lead Circle of Trust event. Raffy Vallejo of the New Group took time out of a very hectic fall semester at San Francisco Theological Seminary to share his understanding of spiritual practices related to the purchase, preparation and serving of food. The South Eastern New Brunswick Group reflected on what studying a river and being present to its suffering has meant for their spiritual lives. Free Spirits report on some of their understandings of spirituality and on their experience of spiritual discernment through collage-making. Don Robinson wrote a Psalm. Every contribution in this newsletter matters and contributes to our community. Thank you.

I'll give the second last word to Susanne Johnson who might say that attending to the Spirit and "[s]piritual disciplines authenticate the Christian life when they evoke compassion in us, sensitize us to what God is doing in the world, prompt us to embrace the stranger, inspire in us heartfelt affection for God and neighbour, create in us the capacity for self-giving love, and lead us to authentic self-love, If spiritual discipline does not open us to these qualities of character, we likely are practicing bogus spirituality."⁸

The last word is yours – in your own heart and mind, in your group and in your comments and suggestions for the newsletter.

(Footnotes)

¹ Pg. 17, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*, Susanne Johnson, Abingdon Press, 1989

Ibid. ² Pg. 31 ³ Pg. 19 ⁴ Pg. 26 ⁵ Pg. 56 ⁶ Pg. 57 ⁷ Pg. 59 ⁸ Pg. 69

Word from the Common Life Groups

Tatamagouche

Margot Metcalfe, Maritime Coordinator for Common Life and a member of the “new” Halifax group.

Maritime Common Life is fortunate to have a basic foundation of very loyal folks. Most of our current members were here at the beginning five years ago. But, lives do change; folks move or make major life decisions. So we are finding that most of our four groups are in transition.

South Eastern New Brunswick Group

This group lost one member – Charlotte Campbell (but she isn't lost to Common Life). However, a new member has joined their group. They continue to pursue a deep spiritual journey together. The summation of their River Project is at the end of this report. Charlotte Campbell and her husband Mac retired to Lake George, NB last year and they are in the process of forming a new group in their area. Charlotte has worked tirelessly for Common life for years and we in the Maritimes are grateful for all of the energy she brings to this experience. We look forward to hearing more about their group, which is in the very beginning stages.

Halifax

The “old” Halifax group disappeared last year as a result of moves and health issues for some members. In February of 2007 a **new** group was formed which includes people new to the program and four “old-timers”. We have been sharing approaches to deepen our experience together. We shared spiritual passages that had special meaning for each of us; we read Parker Palmer's *A Hidden Wholeness*; we studied the Earth Charter; and we occasionally discussed issues that have meaning for all of us e.g. how to integrate children and families more fully into our worship experiences. Now we are embarking upon a period of discernment around the five practices. We are blessed with an interesting and diverse group of folks that make our gatherings particularly rich.

There is some interest in a **second Halifax group**. We'll report as things develop!

North Shore Group (near Tatamagouche)

This group has undergone much transition in the last two years. Two members with a young family are on an extended sabbatical from Common Life; two members have moved away; two others are in “life transition”. However, there are other people in the area who have expressed interest in Common Life, and it is anticipated that a changed group will reconvene before long.

South Eastern New Brunswick Group



In September we gathered for a retreat to bring our River Study to some closure; to welcome a new member to our group; and a “parting blessing” to one of our original members as she moves to the new group she has started in

the Fredericton area. We were located in two cabins high above Shepody Bay. This Bay feeds the tidal waters from the Bay of Fundy into the Petitcodiac River. You may remember that our decision to study this river grew out of a retreat with a focus on water and from encouragement that Ched Myers provided to several of us at a Tatamagouche event.

Over our retreat time we gathered for community prayer times, group reflection times, wonderful shared meals including a corn boil, silence and Sabbath times. Our intent was to continue to deepen our relationship with the Petitcodiac River and to reflect on what this river study has meant to our own spiritual journeys and to how we are called to live in our bio-region and planet. Many of us shared how we have become much more aware of the natural world right around our backdoors. It is also encouraging us to focus on respectful living in our area, buying more locally.



Some of the highlights were: the time to walk along the river; our early morning greeting of the dawn in outdoor worship just as the sun began to rise; celebrating Psalm 104 through the creative work of one of our group and the wonderful afternoon of Sabbath time.

As this year unfolds, we will continue to be present to the Petitcodiac River that is a suffering part of our bio-region.



Bob Childs, Shawn Redden, Shirley Childs, Janice McLean, Marilyn Burrell. See next page for another photo of members.

Word from the Common Life Groups



South Eastern New Brunswick Group: Shawn Redden, Shirley Childs, Charlotte Campbell, Janice McLean, Marilyn Burrell, Linda Fox (missing, Linda Burns). Also see previous page for another photo of group members.

Five Oaks

Free Spirits

Group members: Yvonne Stewart, Mary Joan Bradley, Michele Braniff, Lilojean Frid, Nancy Hardy, Marion Kirkwood, John Klassen, BJ Klassen.

At our April meeting, a tangent remark about what Common Life has meant to us, inspired, Michele, one of our creative spirits, to go home and reflect more deeply on this question through collage making in scrapbook form. She shared her pages with us when we gathered in June. It was moving to hear Michele express her gratitude for CLC and to see through her visual art how Common Life had influenced her life. Her art helped us focus on our planned discussion topic of what spirituality meant for each of us. Here are a few of our thoughts. Spirituality as:

- residing in the deepest core of self.
- glimpses of the eternal in the light and shadow of my being.
- embodiment of spirit. Care for and exercise of the body is integral to a sense of whole-self.
- an exercise in being vulnerable and open to a presence one can't control.
- a practice that needs grounding in a faith, a story, a sacred narrative.



Michele with her scrapbook collages

- a practice that has to be learned through a variety of activities – prayer, meditation, art, lectio divina, etc.
- true healing that comes from a loving relationship beyond oneself (God). Shame as a “hole in the soul.” Many addictions are attempts to heal a wounded soul.
- connection with God’s world and God’s activity in it.

In early October, we met in the attractive and comfortable setting of the refurbished Friendship House. For a change, we began after lunch, enjoyed afternoon tea together and a great dinner out at a Paris restaurant. As Michele led us through a hands on process, she explained **how collage making can function as a form of spirituality or discernment.**

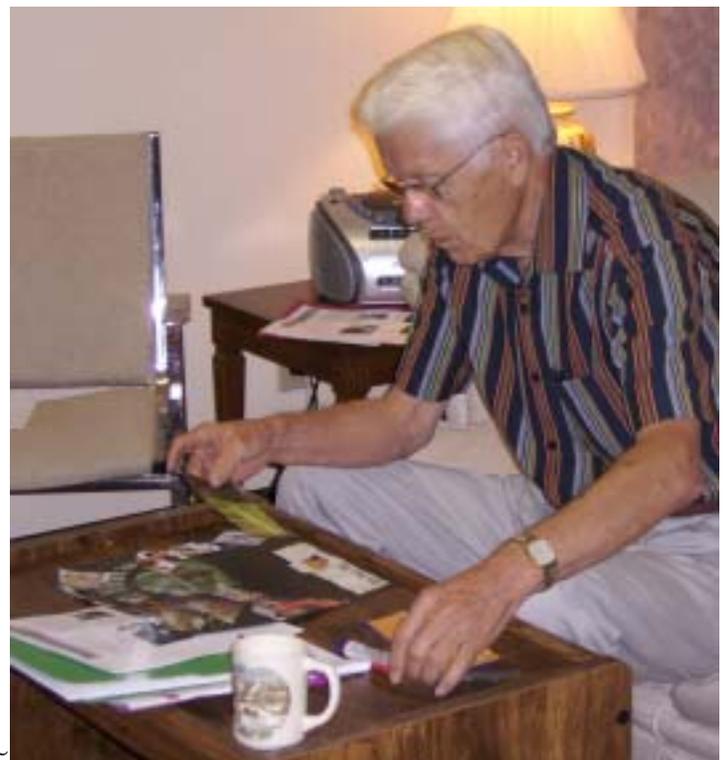
First, begin with a question related to something you are dealing with – such as, “Where is my relationship with my child going?” or *Am I living a purpose-filled life?*” etc. Most of us chose to work on some form of question about the meaning and direction of our Free Spirits group.

Second, select words and images that intuitively feel right even though they may not logically relate to the question. She had brought a huge collection of magazines for us to select from.

Third, place the items on the scrapbook page in a way that speaks to you. When we shared our reflections/creations, she reminded us that the process was not over.

Lastly, the spiritual discipline involves looking back at the pages from time to time to see what new insights surface. Over time, it may be revealed why certain images, words and placements are significant. We found this a “refreshing” activity that took us to another dimension.

John Klassen (below). Also see cover picture of Michele Braniff, John Klassen and Lilojean Frid.



Word from the Common Life Groups

Free Spirits also agreed to read, *A Hidden Wholeness*, by Parker Palmer over the summer. Sharing our reactions and reflections by e-mail was a good way to keep in touch over the summer. We plan to discuss the implications of the book for our group at our next meeting. We'd appreciate hearing from anyone who has already done this.

New Group

Group members: *Stephen Mabee, Allan Baker, Barbara Fullerton, Wayne Myhre, Betty Jean Page, Maggie Plant, Rafael Vallejo.*

The New Group has met twice during the summer period continuing to develop our social concern around empire. We also express our deep sympathy to Betty Jean Page, one of our members, on the loss of her husband. We look forward to the October meeting when we hope she can be a part of us again. We also will miss Raffy at many of our gatherings as he pursues theological studies in San Francisco. We will try to schedule a time when he can be with us during the Christmas break.

Ed. Note: Raffy prepared this wonderful meal for the New Group and offered the reflection that goes with it. No wonder the group misses him!!

Dinner Menu

Starters: *Nori wrapped sushi with prawn, carrot, cucumber and avocado served with soy and wasabi Tapenade of black olives, capers, and anchovies served in tiny cups of red radish*

Salad *of arugula, mache, and mesclun mixed with a medley of golden pineapple, kiwi, strawberry, and honeydew served with cottage cheese and homemade peach poppy seed dressing*

Soup: *Organic Carrot Soup with Ginger and Lemongrass*

Main: *Oven Baked Chicken Breast served on a bed of grilled zucchini, eggplant, roasted red peppers and Ontario Asparagus and then drizzled with basil pine nut parmesan pesto*

Dessert: *Cherry Tiramisu laced with coffee liqueur and topped with newly harvested Bing Cherries, dark chocolate and Vanilla gelato*

Every effort was made in the preparation of this meal to use food that was grown locally and in season. A simple way to sustain, support and honour Ontario agriculture. Over dinner, I shared with our group that "eating is a political act". Our choices around what goes into the plate invariably impacts our planet. And as always our choices define our lives. Faith, food and justice are linked in more ways than one.

Plating the dishes was pure pleasure! I wanted simplicity and balance. I am minimalist when it comes to the food arts. Balance to me means creating a menu of flavours that harmonize with each other and no single flavour overwhelming the community of dishes. (A model for church?) Food that was fresh, eloquent and roaring with flavour! If it can be prophetic as well, then that's great.

At depth, I see myself morphing into a chef-monk sensitive to the flavours of the culinary soul: the sharp fragrance of basil and pine nuts on chicken, the subtle notes of espresso coffee on

vanilla and cherry, the marriage of colors in fresh cut fruit and beautiful tender greens sweet, sour, nutty, bitter; The sweetness of carrots playing off against the exotic nuance of ginger and lemongrass pureed to perfection along with the rich Mennonite Chicken Broth that took close to four hours to create. I can go on and on. ~ *Rafael Vallejo*

See page 10 for an article by Raffy on this subject.

Shekhinah Seekers

Group members: *Pam Byers, Barbara Bitzer, Jane Entiknap, Lloyd Smith*

We met at Jane's cottage. We have completed two years together and decided we'd like to continue being a group for the next two years. Peg Earle and Carol Gierak, while appreciating the time they were a part of the CLC have decided not to continue. We four seekers also decided we were happy and comfortable with the group as we are. We plan to meet three times over the year and of course, attend the June gathering.

Sloe Jam

Group members: *Janet Saunders, Thom Davies, Margaret Fisher, Lynn Godfrey, Deborah Hart, Jennie Jones, Louise Sims and one other.*

As a group, Sloe Jam is experiencing cancer up close—workplace, friends, spouses, self. As a result, members are trying to articulate the meaning of life, trying to consider the possibility of, and the meaning of, "life after death". Our conversations are deep. Our love for one another is growing.

Sloe Jam has been meeting in each others homes. At a two day summer retreat we used the time to reflect on two chapters of Peter Short's *Essays of Encouragement*.

Members are grounded in God by a variety of spiritual practices including the Common Life disciplines.

Soul Friends

Group members: *Bea Arnill, Ione Grover, Amy Hill, Des McCalmont, Joan McCalmont, Gail Lucas-Roth, Paul Roth, Trish Strung.*

We will be gathering for our terminal meeting on Monday, Nov 5th. We have asked Mardi to meet with us.

Tent Dwellers

Group members: *Joan Graham, Eleanor Brent, Henk Dykman, Lorraine Dykman, Joan Gugler, Ellice Oliver, Celia Orth, Doug Ross, Peg Simmons*

The Tent Dwellers have met. In addition to our planning, we continued on with our work at the Francis Sandy Centre. We arranged for all of their books to be listed in an EXCEL format that will allow them to search by subject, author and title. We spent an hour (as a group) shelving in the new facility (which equated to 6 hours of work.) We have also established a small fund with the Grand River Bookstore so that the Centre can

Word from the Common Life Groups

purchase new books. Through an “exchange,” we obtained about 20 copies of Lenten study books.

We decided as a group to take the October “day away” as personal retreat time in which to meditate on our covenant.

Tilted to the Centre

Group members: Don Robinson, Jan Aylward, Barbara Butters, Ruth Ferguson, Ted Black.

Our group met in June and then again on September the 19th. On the latter date, we sat out under the gazebo by the swimming pool, and enjoyed the company of each other in the summer-like weather. We continue to enjoy reflecting on “A Song of Faith.” It inspires lively discussion amongst us and conjures up thoughts and concerns on major issues facing the church and its membership.

Our next meeting is November 21st. We were surprised to look back in our records and realize as of this November we will have completed 5 years together and are entering our 6th. Wow !!

Calling Lakes

Common Life III

As we enter into the second year of our life together, we have evolved into a small but tight-knit community of seekers. We come from diverse backgrounds and we come with varied experiences, but there a strong sense of community identity amongst members of our group.

In reflecting upon the past year, our group would name as a highlight, the gathering in January 2007 when we explored the meaning of community through drumming as a metaphor for community. We called upon the gifts of a member of our group, Jan Harvey (*in photo*), to lead us in a drumming workshop. Jan is a member of a vibrant drumming community in Regina where she has established her own drumming studio to pursue her passion. Jan supplied us with a wide range of percussion instruments. Each instrument came from a unique geographic and cultural heritage. Jan spent some time sharing a little of the background of each instrument. She then took us through a series of three drumming experiences involving rhythms of varying complexity and involving some opportunity for solo performances within the group performance.



There was considerable discussion following the drumming workshop as we reflected upon the experience and what insights it might lend to our understanding of community. Many of the insights revolved around the importance of listening.

It was important to listen to ourselves. Jan maintains that in the context of drumming, all of us the capacity for rhythm, we need only listen to discover that inner rhythm. Similarly, in a spiritual community, it is important that we each discover our own inner rhythm.

It is equally important to listen to others. In doing so, we become aware of the community rhythm. When we are aware of the community rhythm, we can bring our individual rhythm to community in a way that compliments or enhances the community rhythm. A keen ability to listen is essential to the growth and well-being of the community. We are confident that we have become a community of listeners.

As we move into our second year, our identity as a community is one with an emphasis on the exploration of the relationship between our faith and our environment. To that end, our next gathering is scheduled to be held at the Craik Sustainable Living Project. This initiative aims to advance the local use of more ecologically sound technologies and ways of living. It showcases a wide range of sustainable alternatives such as those related to land use, food and fibre production, shelter, energy generation and conservation, water and waste management, and recycling in the context of life on the prairies. We believe that in practicing each of the five disciplines of Common Life, we need to honour the divine in Creation. It is our hope that our visit to this Project will deepen our understanding of our role in Creation and the relationship of our faith to Creation.

~ Craig Neely (October 2007)



Joan Tessier, Laura Herman & Alice McFarlane



Common Life 3 members (L to R): Craig Neely, Val Bodnaryk, Alice McFarlane, Joan Tessier, Laura Herman, Diane Thurlow, Anja Guignon, John McFarlane.

Word from the Common Life Groups

Closing Worship for our October 2007 gathering

written by Laura Herman and John McFarlane

As we move into this time of worship, we invite you to turn to Hymn #12 "Come Touch and Bless" in "More Voices" and to keep that page throughout the service as we will be singing one verse at a time. (As each prayer was read, the items were handed out.)

A Candle

Prayer: God, we thank you for the gift of these candles, for the light they will bring, and for all that illuminates the needy places in your world.

As a flame touches a wick and brings forth warmth and light, so may your love touch the ready places in our selves and in our lives, bringing forth compassion, love, and engagement for justice. Amen

Hymn: verse 1

A Feather

Take a feather. Notice how lightly it rests in your palm. A breath of air can lift and float it.

As you contemplate this feather, think of some images of spirit: descending like a dove; sailing on the wind; breathing; and brooding over the bent world with – ah! – bright wings.¹

Hymn: verse 2

Seeds

Gospel: Mark 4:3-8

Hymn: verse 3

A Rock

In First Nation's tradition, rocks are the oldest beings, the grandmothers and grandfathers of creation. They have traveled many miles; they have seen many things. For the sweat lodge, they are heated red hot. In the lodge they give their life for the life of the people.

Hymn: verse 4

An Empty Place

We have given you four symbols, each representing one of the Common Life principles: a candle, for engagement for justice; a feather, for attending to the spirit; seeds, for dedication to learning, and a rock, for retreat.

There is one symbol missing. We invite you to leave an empty space for that missing symbol, and to use the emptiness to represent what is missing in our spiritual searching, until we go out to seek our common life in community with others.

Hymn: verse 5

Communion was then shared.

(Footnotes)

¹ Phrase adapted from "God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Naramata

Naramata Centre will be beginning a Common Life program later in October. This will be our second time of offering a group a six-weekends-over-two-years experience. Tim Scorer will be leading.

~ Chris Burns

Here are a few words from Tim as he prepares to lead another Common Life group.

It's interesting how different it is for me entering this Common Life experience in 2007 from the way it was back in March 2002 when the other group at Naramata began. I think that it speaks to the timeliness of the founding of the Common Life program: its formation truly was responsive to the yearning of this time for expressions of the Way of Jesus that are more in tune with the original vision as articulated by the gospel writers and by Paul. In the 'Salt and Light' group at First Metropolitan in Victoria, which is based on the Common Life vision, some Gen-X members recently expressed this as 'having had enough of scenic Christianity'. I heard them asking at a transformative level what it means in this time to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him.

Personal Contribution

A Psalm for Busy People ~ Don Robinson

Autumn is a beautiful season of the year.

The valleys laugh and sing with vibrant colour. The fields are golden/brown hues and the orchards blush with laden fruit and bashful ripeness. Recently I was sitting at the Meditation Centre at Five Oaks. As I watched the rippling water tumble down Whiteman's Creek and gurgle its way into the Grand River I pondered how Autumn, like all seasons of the year, is full of spiritual lessons. So I wrote.

"The Lord is my pace setter, I shall not rush.

God makes me to pause and rest for some quiet hush.

The Creator provides me with images of stillness which restores my serenity.

That leads me in ways of efficiency, through calmness of spirit to inner peace.

Even though I have a great many things to do each day, I will not fret, but pray.

The Eternal presence prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity

by anointing my mind with the oil of tranquility.

My cup of joyous energy overflows.

Surely harmony and usefulness

shall be the fruits of my labour,

for I shall walk at the pace of my Lord

and dwell in God's house for ever.

Reflections on a Retreat

by Mardi Tindal, Director of Five Oaks Centre

August, 2007

Parker Palmer is a person of transparent, energizing integrity. Having recently returned from an invitational *Courage to Lead Circle of Trust retreat** led by Parker and other skillful facilitators from the Center for Courage and Renewal, I write these retreat reflections – mostly for myself – in response to what the Circle of Trust process describes as “an open, honest question”, a question designed for deep exploration about one’s life and work. If a question hints at a quick and easy answer, such as “yes” or “no”, it’s not open. If I suspect I already know the answer to a question, it’s not honest.

An open honest question that engages me at the moment is “What am I learning from my soul?” and so I begin by responding to this question.

But just before dealing with the question itself, let me quote Parker about the nature of soul, as he writes about it in *A Hidden Wholeness* (page 33):

“Nobody knows what the soul is,” says the poet Mary Oliver; “it comes and goes/like wind over the water.” But just as we can name the functions of the wind, so we can name some of the functions of the soul without presuming to penetrate its mystery:

- The soul wants to keep us rooted in the ground of our own being, resisting the tendency of other faculties, like the intellect and ego, to uproot us from who we are.
- The soul wants to keep us connected to the community in which we find life, for it understands that relationships are necessary if we are to thrive.
- The soul wants to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear.
- The soul wants to give us life and wants us to pass it along, to become life-givers in a world that deals too much death.

So what am I learning from soul in the wake of July’s retreat?

First, soul is teaching me that retreats such as the one I’ve just experienced are essential for cultivating my own heart and integrity. Consequently, they are essential to whatever healing leadership I can offer in my family, workplace, community and planetary home. Parker reminds us that, for much of human history, the word “heart” didn’t just refer to emotions as it does today. Instead, it encompassed “the centre of the human self, where everything comes together – where will and intellect and feeling and intuition and the capacity to hold a vision all



Mardi with Parker Palmer at a *Courage to Lead Circle of Trust retreat*

converge. It’s about the integrity of the human self.” (Rittenhouse, p. 279, *Living the Questions*)

Without such retreat opportunities for deep rooting and nourishment (which I now have decided to undertake seasonally away from regular work and community), my soul is at risk of being blown away by mistakes, fears and temptations which my roles and responsibilities tend to bring with them. On the windiest of days, for instance, I am tempted to fear for the security of Five Oaks, to feel solely responsible for its “success” as a Centre and to begin desperately imagining how to generate greater financial support. These are days when I am not listening to soul, when I have forgotten that the life of this Centre is in hands beyond my own and that year-end financial statements will not be the measure of my faithful leadership. And worse, days like this can distract me from providing the kind of leadership which is in touch with the ground of my being. My soul is given voice, and I am given ears to listen to it within Parker’s practices of retreat.

The heartbeat of soul was heard through the practices of listening to poetry read aloud; in time for silent response, sometimes with and sometimes without the help of offered questions; small group opportunities that provided generous time to “hear one another into speaking” (listening to one another without offering advice or fixing!); clearness committee experience and time to sit in a silent circle of twenty-four, listening to well-distilled words wherever they bubbled up, whenever they were ready to be spoken, as accent to fulsome silence.

Second, soul is reminding me of the importance of community: circles such as this retreat community and Common Life

Articles

Community circles. As an extrovert, I most often hear my soul speaking as I hear myself describe my deepest, heartfelt joys and sorrows aloud to others. During the first evening of this retreat we were invited to reflect silently, and then to listen to one another in response to questions about the places in our lives of greatest life-giving congruence (sources of joy) as well as places of dissonance and sorrow, and about something deep inside that needs to be freed or exercised in order for us to live. I will not quickly forget my soul's revelations that evening.

Third, soul is assuring me that there are indeed daily ways to attend to truth, to the ebb and flow of my own action and contemplation in order to live what Parker calls "an undivided life", deepening awareness of what he describes as "the endless inner-outer exchanges that shape us [me] and our world and of the power we [I] have to make choices about them." (p. 49, *A Hidden Wholeness*) Disciplined times of silence and prayer and regular meetings with my spiritual director are already among my practices. Retreats such as this one teach me to add the ingredients of spirited poetry, deepening questions and compassionate friends who are also seeking to live with integrity, ready to help one another by creating community that's safe for souls to be themselves.

Such attention equips me to better receive truth in the midst of work difficulties and pressures because I am being regularly reminded of what God has placed in and before me, and that I am invited to participate in the holy weaving of who I am and what I do as a person loved by God. Since work often presents me with frightening challenges, these practices become the route to calm courage. They make it more likely that I can, as Parker says, "'be not afraid' even while I have fear" (p. 57, *Living the Questions*)

This kind of integrity-weaving is about discovering where one's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet (as Frederick Buechner says); it's about finding a consistency between reflection and action; it happens in both solitude and in community, and it is at the heart of Five Oaks (www.fiveoaks.on.ca). It happens here as one rediscovers her true nature in the midst of the larger natural order when walking our trails or labyrinth; when another reconnects with God's love while being lovingly listened to through spiritual companionship during a guided silent retreat or day away; when yet others come to know the support of a learning, disciplined community, be it through Common Life or Neos or dozens of other programs. (Participants in our Courage to Lead Circle of Trust retreats will undoubtedly also have this experience of integration.)

Fourth, soul is helping me to understand why this kind of retreat work is so unusual and so important. We live in a culture that tends more toward finding the 'quick fix' (dealing more often with symptom than with cause) than the often slow, healing path; more toward technical training than to seeking truth. One of the most important disciplines taught and practiced at Circle of Trust retreats is the discipline of listening without trying to advise or fix. This isn't an easy practice when most of our educational experiences have taught us how to offer "helpful"

critique and suggestion. Our Five Oaks retreat experiences could well be measured against our fidelity to this counter-cultural discipline of allowing another's inner thoughts and struggles to come forward to be treasured and explored in the midst of hospitable listening rather than frightening critique that can feel – and be – deadly. The extent to which we allow another soul to speak without correction is the extent to which we are engaged in life-giving.

Finally, I feel that I'm being called through this process to delve more deeply into understanding how to use the gifts God gave me for the work God has called me to. As I said earlier, this work is frightening more often than I like to admit. By being honest about those fears, I find that I am freed to rely more on others to do what they've been called to do and to trust that if I take seriously the gifts I bring, that I will be able to lead with courage.

The retreat at the Seasons Retreat Center in Kalamazoo has inspired me to frame more of my writing and interpersonal dialogue with the help of poetry and open, honest questions. My hope is that others will find their souls engaged by questions as well. After all, I follow Jesus and he was, according to gospel writers, very good at asking questions, often answering one question with another question as Mary Hess reminds us in *Engaging Technology in Theological Education*:

Who are you? receives "Who do you say that I am?" "Who is my neighbour?" evokes a story and a question in response. The communities of people who gathered around Jesus were hungry for answers, but they received stories and more questions, and were thereby drawn into new patterns of practice.

Our retreat ended – and I end now – with words of *Hope**, Victoria Stafford's wonderful poem describing where we plant ourselves in a place of truth-telling...

"And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
telling people what we are seeing,
asking people what they see."

My soul is helping me see the truth about my life and work a little more clearly. I hope that these reflections might help your soul to do the same for you.

* From "The Small Work in the Great Work", in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb, 2004

Speaking of new patterns of practice, for those Common Life Community groups who are interested, I would be pleased to guide you through a Clearness Committee experience informed by Parker Palmer's leadership during this exceptional retreat. I know that some of you have already had a Clearness Committee experience and the practice is described in A Hidden Wholeness. However, having had two Circle of Trust experiences with Clearness Committees and several other Clearness Committee experiences, I am still learning about how to use this in ways that truly welcome soul, and would welcome another opportunity to learn, with you.

Believing in The God Who Feeds and Setting The Mother Bird Free

by Rafael Vallejo



The inspiration to write this article came from a meal. We had this meal during one of our Common Life meetings which we decided to hold in the home of one of our members. It was after that meal that my community encouraged me to write. I had my community look over this text once it was written. So in some way, it is no longer just me, but all of us who are speaking and sharing this with you.

In this article I will invite you to dwell for a moment on “the God who feeds”: an image we find in Jewish and Christian writings as a way people described their experience of God. I will explore the maternal in this metaphor, and point us to a God who is Mother to us all and who nurses us at her breast.

After which, I will suggest ways you can include “the God who feeds” in the five practices of our Common Life: Engagement for Justice, Attending to the Spirit, Dedication to Learning, Commitment to Community, and Retreat. These are the five ways we have chosen to live out our discipleship.

I will use language from *A Song of Faith* which affirms that “the ordinary things of life—water, bread, wine—point beyond themselves to God and God’s love, teaching us to be alert to the sacred in the midst of life.”¹ And I will close by showing how to relate these practices around food and eating to our hope in “the making new of all things.”

The God Who Feeds

Imagine God as Mother. Imagine her feeding her people in the desert with “manna” from heaven. In Hebrew, the word for cake is “le-shad” and the word for breast is “shad”, an interesting play on words.²

An image of God nursing Israel is found in the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32: 13-14). Here, we read of God feeding Israel with food of the best kind: oil, honey, milk, butter, wine. In the experience of ancient Israel travelling through the wilderness, God’s food is always there and it is always enough. We can make the claim that Exodus 16 is about a caring Mother who makes sure her children are fed well. This is also the way the Mother makes herself present to her children.

Women in many ancient cultures are the preparers of food. It is therefore significant, according to Carol Meyers, when God is

described in these terms.³ Even more significant is that as she feeds her people, she also creates a system of equal distribution so nobody hoards, and everybody is given what they need.

One of the lessons of the wilderness is learning to depend on God. Imagine dependence here like the way a baby “depends” on its mother for milk and affection.

It is a matter of life and death. Israel is never to forget the God who brought them out of Egypt and fed them in the desert. They learn for forty years, to trust that God will give them their bread, one day at a time. This gave them the opportunity to renew their trust daily. Everybody had enough to eat, and no one lacked anything (Exodus 16, 18).

Five Practices of Common Life

Engagement for Justice:

This image of the God who feeds, calls on us to practice justice in the way we relate to food. It urges us to take care of and feed *all* of creation, because God is a God who sustains us all (Psalm 104). In order for life to continue, God feeds (Gen 1, 29-30), not just us, but also “the beasts of the earth, and the birds of the air.” The earth is not just for us humans, but for “all our relations”, the mountains, the oceans, the animals, and the plants. How is it then that we act as if we have exclusive claim to God’s bounty? How is it that this beautiful world is now full of “thorns and thistles”? The short answer is: “We have sinned” We have made choices that do not put us in right relationship with our God, ourselves, each other and the earth. We have torn the web of life. We have broken our covenant.

In Gen 2 we find a God who after breathing the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human, decides to plant a garden, full of every tree, “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Here we see a God who not only feeds us but also gives us the means to provide food for ourselves. If we are wise, we will share. If we are foolish, we will hoard. How is it then that “the tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth in thirst and the children beg for food but no one gives them anything?” (Lam 4:1-4)

Let our hearts break open with this lament for our children. Today Nature stands side by side as co-victim with the poor and powerless.⁴ She is just as vulnerable.

We can make poverty history, but first we have to admit that all of us collectively have created this poverty that we seek to end.

Articles

If by chance you see a place which a bird has made for itself in a tree or on the earth, with young ones or eggs, and the mother bird seated on the young ones or on the eggs, do not take the mother bird with the young: See that you let the mother bird go, but the young ones you may take; so it will be well for you and your life will be long. (Deuteronomy 22, 6-7)

There are some of us who will not let the Mother Bird go. And there are others who will kill the young ones and the Mother as well.

Attending to the Spirit:

In attending to the Spirit, we feed on God's word spoken to us in scripture. And we celebrate the living word that dwells among us. We allow this word to do its work in us. Before each meal, we can start by blessing the Mother Bird, that which is source. We can "say grace" slowly to acknowledge that "Nothing exists that does not find its source in God." And therefore "Our first response to God's providence is gratitude" (*SoF*). When we are mindful, our eating puts us in touch with the Divine in us and each other.

There is another way of attending to the Spirit when we eat. And that is to be conscious of the process that brought this food to our tables. This means eating with full consciousness of everything that is involved in the food we eat. Where did it come from? How did it get to your table? Michael Pollan in *The Botany of Desire* sees the world from the point of view of a plant.⁵ He suggests that we follow the food chain that sustains us, all the way from the earth (or more accurately the sun) to the plate. It used to be that we depended on the sun for food. Today however, there is more and more dependence on fossil fuels. The burger we eat may have more impact on the planet than the gas consumed by an SUV. And so next time you sit down for a meal be aware that laid out before you is a narrative about what is going on globally. Let the food on the plate be for you "sacred text" from which you can listen to what God wants you to do as a person of faith. Remember this truth: you are not separate from what you eat. Indeed, what you eat becomes you.

Dedication to Learning:

"The way we do things" is often a result of "the way we understand things." This discipline invites us to read and pray God's word in scripture. It invites us to look at scripture, tradition, events and experience as deep wells of God's continuing revelation. Looking at the food on the plate as sacred text invites us to think more deeply about it. Learn how food moves from farm to plate. Understand the connection between plate and planet. Appreciate what it means if the lettuce in your salad may have taken 2000 miles to get to your table. Know that this could mean that the cost to the planet is much more than the price you paid for your head of lettuce.

We are carbon life forms. Do you understand what "carbon footprint" is all about? Are you prepared to look at the carbon footprint of your family, your home, your church?

Would you be interested in greening your faith? Do you want to start making little changes in what you eat and how you buy your

food? You can begin by buying from your local farmers and bakers and butchers, weaving relationships with them in your area. Or, follow the 100 mile diet as introduced by Vancouver couple Alissa Smith and J. B. McKinnon. This would mean for those of us living around Five Oaks that our foodshed would be the area from Orillia in the North, Erie in the South, Sarnia in the west and Niagara in the east. Let us receive the food God gives us from the four directions.

Commitment to Community:

Community is the place where we can learn a lot about food. Community like food is a gift. The Holy Spirit creates community. Food in the Ancient Near East was not just about eating. In the Sinai myth (Gen 14) after God handed the Law to Moses, the writers of Genesis report that Moses and the elders "ate and drank". This was their community's way of sealing the covenant with Yahweh. Jesus will do a similar thing with the New Covenant.

What role do food and water play in your community? How do you demonstrate your commitment to community in your food choices? How can we relate to Whiteman's Creek near Five Oaks as a life giving member of our community? Should we allow Empire to **privatize** water, knowing how important it is as a source of life to communities everywhere?

Let us remember that when we say "Give us this day our daily bread", we make ourselves accountable: to those who are without bread and to those whose bread is taken away from them.

Retreat:

Our Rule of Life brings rhythm to our days. How we spend our time defines how we spend our lives. And so we pause daily like Bev Oaten suggested to view the unfolding pattern. Silence allows us to recognize that we are all part of the one soup. In the silence we sit at the table of mystery, seeking God in the heart of all of life.

When I think of our commitment to Sabbath and quiet time, I think of the slow food movement (Italy, 1986). It is counter-culture to fast food. It is about "the joy of slow". It is a call to re-examine our lives and let go of the cult of speed and redeem ourselves from the un-health that we have built into our days. The slow food movement seeks to protect the heritage of food traditions and cultures everywhere. It asks us to consider ourselves not as consumers but as co-creators, by being informed about how our food is produced and supporting those who produce it. Thus we all become part of this life-giving process.

During our last Common Life Retreat in May 2007, some of us decided to garden. I hear a deep theology in "We are stardust, we are golden. We've got to get ourselves back to the garden" (Joni Mitchell). Some of us grew up with this song, now we may want to grow into it.

Gardening can be a time to care for the Mother Bird and be present to the God who feeds. Let us get back to the garden and allow it to show us the face of the God who gave us the Garden. Let us be awed with the thought that we are here co-evolving with the plants that teach and allow us to grow them. (Pollan)

Articles

Conclusion

We have used the metaphor of the God who feeds as a way to open us up to the reality of God's nurture in our lives. We have looked at some ways we can do our five practices around the theme of food. Now let us talk about how the narrative comes together full circle.

Paul tells us that all of creation is included (Rom 8) in God's healing work. We are joined with all the other streams of energy that are flowing back to the Great Ocean. All of creation will be restored and renewed. And all of it is "held together in Christ" (Col 1:17). At the moment, we are groaning with all creation, and waiting with eager longing for the time when "every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord" (Zech 14:20).

Believing in the God who feeds means continuing to hope like Habbakuk, who even "though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines...and the fields produce no food" (Hab 3:17-18) continues to joy and hope in the Lord. My dear friend Jo Gross describes hope this way: "At a time when their outside world seems to be unravelling and the poor are blamed for their own oppression, hope comes. It is not the kind of hope that says "everything is going to be all right," but the kind of hope that says, "God is alive and cares because people care".⁶

Everything we have spoken of so far is the thin edge of the wedge. God is doing a new thing in you and me. The love of God invites us to see in new ways, to listen to new voices, to speak a new language to describe Common Life Community. May we become living expressions of the God who feeds in our service to Life in the world.

We are aware that a faith that no longer connects with the reality we experience needs to be updated. It is more comfortable not to do this. Does our God dwell in the temple of certainty or in a tent that wanders in the desert?

It is more comfortable to stay in our "certainties." "We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity." (Walter Brueggemann). Will we be faithful to the God who feeds us? Will we set the Mother Bird free? Will we journey with a God "who makes all things new?"

Rafael studies Christian Spirituality and Practice at San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, Marin County, California. He is also a Chef and enjoys sharing kitchen table wisdom with "The New Group" his Common Life Community at Five Oaks, Paris, Ontario.

(Footnotes)

1 *A Song of Faith*, United Church of Canada 2006

2 L. Juliana M. Classens *The God who Provides, Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004) 2-3

3 Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145-147

4 *Report on Global Stewardship*, First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo, Marin County CA, 2007

5 Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire, A Plant's Eye View of the World*, (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2001), p xvi

6 Jo Vaughn Gross, *The Welcome Table, Reflections on the Banquet*, (Ross CA: Comaro Press, 1995), 93

Something "on the slant"

This poem provides one image of what our collective Common Life Community might be like as we attend to the Spirit.

The Engineer and the Asparagus

Asparagus, once established, bustles
it grows so vehemently,
cone by cone nosing out towards
those (unseen) garbled acres and the sun's
tusks of flaming.

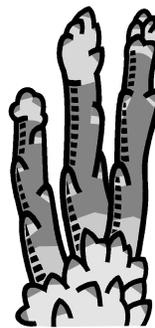
A person - as the dentist meticulously,
silverly, nicks him out, under
fluorescence, in a dead air, with the gutters
tinily gurgling -

a person
compacts his growth, shells over
sore decay spots, and retracts,
coil upon twanging coil.

Put down the dental floss, the number nine iron,
the gear knob, the wire-clippers, the periscope and
fins,

Just put down, for a minute the obsolete
stencil-stylus, the ink-pad stamp, the farmyard
gas pump feed-line.

Down tools. And in
abashed intervals
let us abound
asparagus-like
(straight up through the driveway concrete!)



*by Margaret Avison, one of
Canada's much lauded and deeply
religious poets, who died in July 2007.
from, sunblue in Always Now: The
Collected Poems, Volume Two, The
Porcupine's Quill, 2004.*

**God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description. Yet,
in love, the one eternal God
seeks relationship.
~ A Song of Faith**

General News from the Centres

Tatamagouche

Annual Gathering

Our Annual Gathering was held at Tatamagouche Centre in May with about seventeen members in attendance. The theme was "Living Simply so that Others May Simply Live". Exercises and reflection focussed on the thinking of Joanna Macy. Each of the groups led a service. Participants find that these times when we gather in a larger group are a deepening time for all of us.

Our next Annual Gathering is 4-5 April 2008. Some of us also hope to attend a retreat as a group with Philip Newell at the Centre on 22-24 April 2008.

Five Oaks

Young Adult Discernment Day

We had a good discerning gathering of 7 young adults at Five Oaks on October 21st. Without exception, they ended the session feeling excited about forming a Common Life group and decided to 'talk' more about it online. One participant reported today that what they want to do between now and their next meeting is to brainstorm electronically about the variety of creative ways in which they could imagine engaging with the disciplines/practices. They are considering Facebook and other social networking tools as a vehicle for this. They have committed to returning to Five Oaks on Saturday, January 5th, when school schedules are easier for those in teachers' college, etc., to explore further. They expect others who were not able to come yesterday to join them that day, and hope that more than one young adult Common Life group will form then.

An Opportunity to Give

A member of the Five Oaks Common Life Community suggested that we publicize the cost of producing and mailing this newsletter twice a year in the hopes that someone might be inspired to make a donation to cover the cost. The thinking was that if we shared actual physical copies of the newsletter around, others might see it and become interested. So... here is your opportunity. It costs \$500. to \$600. If you choose to make a donation in this amount, Five Oaks will gratefully mail the newsletter to all their members except for those who explicitly do not want it in this form.

Annual Gathering

Nancy Reeves, a registered clinical psychologist, spiritual director, and author provided leadership for our retreat. Our reflections were structured around themes from her recent book, *A Match Made in Heaven* which focuses on our relationship

with God. We were invited to reflect first alone and then in our CLC groupings on questions such as:

- When and how have you experienced God's love - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- Have you received an unexpected benefit when you expressed or showed gratitude to another person or God?
- How has God showed you one of your "weeds" and provided refining and healing?
- What was a belief you once held about God or Christianity, perhaps as a child, that you later realized was restricting you or your divine-human relationship?
- What were you taught about forgiveness as a child? What insight came out of a forgiveness experience?

Group members reported that their respectful conversations gave them new understandings of each other and drew them closer together. The whole group had the most engagement around the issue of forgiveness – particularly around the possibility or not of forgiving an act of personal or social violation. We also noted our different understandings of God and the effect on how we talked about God.

A thought-provoking comment was, "People's judgment is for shame and blame. God's judgment is for possibilities."

Next year's Annual Gathering will be from 5:00 PM June 15 to 6:30 PM June 16, 2008. The leader will be Nancy Cocks, formerly deputy warden of Iona Centre. The theme will be related to Delighting in God: Discerning What Matters Most in Our Faith. If you know of anyone interested in Common Life, you might consider inviting them to the discernment evening on June 16.

The theme for the next issue will probably be, **Engagement for Justice.**

Please consider writing or recommending articles, art, poems, etc. on this subject or anything else you would like to contribute.

Thank you.



This newsletter has been formatted by Debra Brown, Communications Coordinator of Calling Lakes Centre.

As always, I am impressed by the commitment and diversity of practices being explored by the Common Life groups and hope that you find encouragement and inspiration in these pages.